

memo

Thursday, November 13, 2003

To: Daffy

From: Elmer

Re: yet another excerpt from the novel in progress, *Zen Arcade*, ch. 11, "The Biggest Lie"

Lord, I'm sure an angry bastard for someone who has spent a life of nothing, he thought. If it was truly nothing, then there's nothing to be angry about. I'm so damn smart. Now I have no reason to be angry.

It didn't work. He had spent years trying to control his emotions with cold reason. It had never worked. He knew that. He continued trying anyway.

He stood up and made the floor squeak as he turned around to put his dishes in the sink. He turned the hot water on, squirted a little soap, and began to scrub. He liked washing the dishes. He was occupied. He didn't have to think about anything but getting the dishes clean. He could be silent.

He had spent so many years making a big deal of silence—or "silence" as he would say pointedly—because it was the one truly unobtainable thing. The brain is never quiet. He had hoped by training himself to listen, by being completely still and breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, that he could silence his brain for a few minutes. There might have been a brief moment in his youth when that had been true, but he doubted it. Probably he had just been confusing "silence" with silence. And he knew better now than to believe himself when he said he'd spend the whole day staring out the window and thinking about nothing—and the joke about forgetting what he was thinking before he even thought about it was just that, a joke. He never stopped thinking, and he never forgot, and here he was, almost 59, thinking about nothing all the time, forgetting nothing all the time.

"What was it?" he said out loud. A knock at the door? A ringing phone? A mysterious woman? And I'd find myself either in a comfortable den or a room on skid row at the age of 50? Well, shit, that was nine years ago, and I was here in this house. There was no leaving. There was no grand quest for love or truth or both. There was only more of this same nothing. And golly-gee-willikers, wouldn't it be nice to say no, nothing more of this same sameness, but shit—not even washing the dishes is as nice as it used to be.

He had been scrubbing the same glass for fifteen minutes. He rinsed it and set it in the drying rack. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth and finished washing the dishes. He drained the sink and then wiped it out with a sponge. He rinsed the sponge and put it back in its place to the left of the sink. He turned around and the floor squeaked. He hopped up and down on the squeak a couple of times. He vaguely wished the floor would collapse.

He thought about a cartoon he had seen with an unscrupulous duck who sold some poor, witless man a fully automated house. There were buttons for everything. There had even been a button to make the second floor come down to the first, thus eliminating the need to walk up stairs ever again. Of course, when the man pressed it, the second floor came down and destroyed everything on the first. Once upon a time, the cartoon had made him laugh, now he just saw life as an unscrupulous salesduck, forever presenting the hapless homeowner with the wrong button, and daring him to press it.